

## **Into Thin Air**

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*This story was reported by Ron Moreau and Sami Yousafzai on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border; Zahid Hussain in Islamabad; Rod Nordland in Tora Bora; Mark Hosenball, Michael Hirsh, Michael Isikoff, John Barry, Dan Ephron and Eve Conant in Washington; Christopher Dickey in Paris, and Roya Wolverson in New York. It was written by Evan Thomas.*

### ***He's still out there.***

The Americans were getting close. It was early in the winter of 2004-05, and Osama bin Laden and his entourage were holed up in a mountain hideaway along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Suddenly, a sentry, posted several kilometers away, spotted a patrol of U.S. soldiers who seemed to be heading straight for bin Laden's redoubt. The sentry radioed an alert, and word quickly passed among the Qaeda leader's 40-odd bodyguards to prepare to remove "the Sheik," as bin Laden is known to his followers, to a fallback position. As Sheik Said, a senior Egyptian Qaeda operative, later told the story, the anxiety level was so high that the bodyguards were close to using the code word to kill bin Laden and commit suicide. According to Said, bin Laden had decreed that he would never be captured. "If there's a 99 percent risk of the Sheik's being captured, he told his men that they should all die and martyr him as well," Said told Omar Farooqi, a Taliban liaison officer to Al Qaeda who spoke to a NEWSWEEK reporter in Afghanistan.

The secret word was never given. As the Qaeda sentry watched the U.S. troops, the patrol started moving in a different direction. Bin Laden's men later concluded that the soldiers had nearly stumbled on their hideout by accident. (One former U.S. intelligence officer told NEWSWEEK that he was aware of official reporting on this incident.)

And so it has gone for six years. American intelligence officials interviewed by NEWSWEEK ruefully agree that the hunt to find bin Laden has been more a game of chance than good or "actionable" intelligence. Since bin Laden slipped away from Tora Bora in December 2001, U.S. intelligence has never had better than a 50-50 certainty about his whereabouts. "There hasn't been a serious lead on Osama bin Laden since early 2002," says Bruce Riedel, who recently retired as a South Asia expert at the CIA. "What we're doing now is shooting in the dark in outer space. The chances of hitting anything are zero."

How can that be? With all its spy satellites and aerial drones, killer commandos and millions in reward money, why can't the world's greatest

superpower find a middle-aged, possibly ill, religious fanatic with a medieval mind-set? The short answer, sometimes overlooked, is that good, real-time intelligence about the enemy is hard to come by in any war, and manhunts are almost always difficult, especially if the fugitive can vanish into a remote region with a sympathetic population. (Think how long-five years-it took the FBI to track down Eric Rudolph, the Atlanta Olympic bomber, in the wilds of North Carolina.) That said, the U.S. government has made the job harder than necessary. The Iraq War drained resources from the hunt, and some old bureaucratic bugaboos-turf battles and fear of risk-undermined the effort. The United States can't just barge into Pakistan without upsetting, and possibly dooming, President Pervez Musharraf, who seems to lurch between trying to appease his enemies and riling them with heavy-handed repression.

The story of the search for the men known to American spies and soldiers as high-value targets one and two (HVT 1 and HVT 2)-Osama bin Laden and his possibly more dangerous No. 2, Ayman al-Zawahiri-is a frustrating, at times agonizing, tale of missed opportunities, damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't choices, and outright blunders. It has been related to NEWSWEEK by dozens of American, Pakistani and Afghan military and intelligence officials, as well as a few Qaeda sympathizers like Omar Farooqi. Capturing bin Laden "continues to be a huge priority," says Frances Fragos Townsend, President George W. Bush's chief counterterror adviser. It may be true, as Townsend points out, that Qaeda leaders do not have anything like the safe haven they enjoyed in Afghanistan before 9/11. But it is also true that Al Qaeda has been reconstituting itself in the mountains of Pakistan and Afghanistan, and that the terrorist organization is determined to stage more 9/11s, and maybe soon. "We have very strong indicators that Al Qaeda is planning to attack the West and is likely to attack, and we are pretty sure about that," says retired Vice Adm. John Redd, chief of the National Counterterrorism Center, which coordinates all U.S. intelligence in the so-called Global War on Terror (GWOT). Hank Crumpton, who ran the CIA's early hunt for bin Laden in 2001-02 as deputy chief of the agency's counterterrorism center and recently retired as the State Department's coordinator of counterterrorism, says, "It's bad; it's going to come."

Before 9/11, the hunt for bin Laden was marked by a certain tentativeness, an official reluctance to suck America into the dirty business of political assassination or to get U.S. troops killed. Within days after 9/11, President Bush was vowing to capture bin Laden "dead or alive," and Cofer Black, the CIA's counterterror chief at the time, was ordering his troops to bring back bin Laden's head "in a box." (In fact, CIA operatives in Afghanistan requested a box and dry ice, just in case.) With old-fashioned derring-do, CIA case officers, carrying millions of dollars, choppered into Afghanistan to work with tribesmen to drive out Al Qaeda and its Taliban hosts. The CIA's alacrity caused some heartburn at the Pentagon. According to Bob Woodward's "Bush at War," Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld steamed impatiently while the military seemed to dither,

stymied by weather and fussing with complex backup and rescue arrangements before the brass would commit any troops.

Rumsfeld's foot-stamping was rewarded. By mid-October, CIA case officers and Army, Navy, and Air Force Special Operations units were working together in unusual harmony, using high-tech air support and, at one point, mounting what Rumsfeld gleefully called "the first cavalry charge of the 21st century" to kill, capture or chase away thousands of jihadists. The Taliban fled for the hills. Bin Laden, it seemed, would be cornered. Indeed, on Dec. 15, CIA operatives listening on a captured jihadist radio could hear bin Laden himself say "Forgive me" to his followers, pinned down in their mountain caves near Tora Bora.

As it happened, however, the hunt for bin Laden was unraveling on the very same day. As recalled by Gary Berntsen, the CIA officer in charge of the covert team working with the Northern Alliance, code-named Jawbreaker, the military refused his pleas for 800 Army Rangers to cut off bin Laden's escape. Maj. Gen. Dell Dailey, the Special Ops commander sent out by Central Command, told Berntsen he was doing an "excellent job," but that putting in ground troops might offend America's Afghan allies. "I don't give a damn about offending our allies!" Berntsen yelled, according to his 2005 book, "Jawbreaker." "I only care about eliminating Al Qaeda and delivering bin Laden's head in a box!" (Dailey, now the State Department's counterterror chief, told NEWSWEEK that he did not want to discuss the incident, except to say that Berntsen's story is "unsubstantiated.")

Berntsen went to Crumpton, his boss at the CIA, who described to NEWSWEEK his frantic efforts to appeal to higher authority. Crumpton called CENTCOM's commander, Gen. Tommy Franks. It would take "weeks" to mobilize a force, Franks responded, and the harsh, snowy terrain was too difficult and the odds of getting bin Laden not worth the risk. Frustrated, Crumpton went to the White House and rolled out maps of the Pakistani-Afghan border on a small conference table. President Bush wanted to know if the Pakistanis could sweep up Al Qaeda on the other side. "No, sir," Crumpton responded. (Vice President Dick Cheney did not say a word, Crumpton recalled.) The meeting was inconclusive. Franks, who declined to comment, has written in his memoirs that he decided, along with Rumsfeld, that to send troops into the mountains would risk repeating the mistake of the Soviets, who were trapped and routed by jihadist guerrilla fighters in the 1980s (helped out, it should be recalled, with Stinger missiles provided by the CIA).

To catch bin Laden, the CIA was left to lean on local tribesmen, a slender reed. NEWSWEEK recently interviewed two of the three tribal chiefs involved in the operation, Hajji Zahir and Hajji Zaman. They claimed that the CIA overly relied on the third chieftain, Hazrat Ali-and that Ali was paid off (to the tune of \$6 million) by Al Qaeda to let bin Laden slip away. Ali could not be reached for comment. But Crumpton, who admits that he has no hard evidence, told NEWSWEEK he is "confident" that a payoff allowed Al Qaeda to escape. Unsure

which side would win, some tribesmen apparently hedged by taking money from both sides.

Bin Laden was not so much seeking refuge as coming home when he disappeared into the jagged peaks along the frontier of northwest Pakistan. He had always liked hunting and horseback riding in the mountains, and had even built himself a crude swimming pool with a spectacular view near Tora Bora. Though a wealthy Saudi, bin Laden had long since learned to live close to the ground, abjuring his followers to learn to survive without modern comforts like plumbing or air conditioning.

Local Pashtun tribesmen were not about to turn bin Laden in for a reward, even a \$25 million one. The strictly observed custom of defending guests, part of an ancient honor code called Pashtunwali, insulated Al Qaeda. The Pakistan central government could do little to crack this social system. The wilds of the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) have been virtually ungovernable for centuries. The British Raj failed, and the Pakistan government never tried very hard, leaving administration up to federally appointed tribal agents and law enforcement in the hands of a local constabulary of dubious loyalty. In the 1980s, during the insurrection against Soviet rule in Afghanistan, the tribal agencies were a kind of staging area for jihadists like bin Laden. Saudi money built hundreds of madrassas-fundamentalist schools that radicalized local youth-and Pakistani intelligence (the ISI) formed alliances with the jihadists to subvert the Soviet-backed Afghan regime.

The American effort to chase bin Laden into this forbidding realm was hobbled and clumsy from the start. While the terrain required deep local knowledge and small units, career officers in the U.S. military have long been wary of the Special Operations Forces best suited to the task. In the view of the regular military, such "snake eaters" have tended to be troublesome, resistant to spit-and-polish discipline and rulebooks. Rather than send the snake eaters to poke around mountain caves and mud-walled compounds, the U.S. military wanted to fight on a grander stage, where it could show off its mobility and firepower. To the civilian bosses at the Pentagon and the eager-to-please top brass, Iraq was a much better target. By invading Iraq, the United States would give the Islamists-and the wider world-an unforgettable lesson in American power. Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich was on Rumsfeld's Defense Policy Board and, at the time, a close confidant of the SecDef. In November 2001, Gingrich told a NEWSWEEK reporter, "There's a feeling we've got to do something that counts-and bombing caves is not something that counts."

When Franks refused to send Army Rangers into the mountains at Tora Bora, he was already in the early stages of planning for the next war. By early 2002, new Predators-aerial drones that might have helped the search for bin Laden-were instead being diverted off the assembly line for possible use in Iraq. The military's most elite commando unit, Delta Force, was transferred from

Afghanistan to prep for the invasion of Iraq. The Fifth Special Forces Group, including the best Arabic speakers, was sent home to retool for Iraq, replaced by the Seventh Special Forces Group-Spanish speakers with mostly Latin American experience. The most knowledgeable CIA case officers, the ones with tribal contacts, were rotated out. Replacing a fluent Arabic speaker and intellectual, the new CIA station chief in Kabul was a stickler for starting meetings on time (his own watch was always seven minutes fast) but allowed that he had read only one book on Afghanistan. One slightly bitter spook, speaking anonymously to NEWSWEEK to protect his identity, likened the station chief to Captain Queeg in "The Caine Mutiny." (CIA spokesman Paul Gimigliano insists "station chiefs go through a rigorous, multistep selection process, designed to get leaders with the right skills in the right places.")

The frustrations of the snake eaters are well illustrated by the recollections of Adam Rice, the operations sergeant of a Special Forces A-Team working out of a safe house near Kandahar in 2002. With his close-cropped orange hair and beard, wearing a yellow Hawaiian shirt around the safe house, Rice was not the sort to shine at inspections at boot camp. But he had lived in Kabul as a child (his father had been a USAID worker) and he had been a Special Forces operator for more than two decades. In July 2002, a CIA case officer told Rice that a figure believed to be Mullah Omar, the one-eyed chief of the Taliban, had been tracked by aerial drone to a location in the Shahikot Valley, a short flight to the north. The Taliban chief and his entourage would be vulnerable to a helicopter assault, but the Americans had to move quickly.

Rice was not optimistic about getting timely permission. Whenever he and his men moved within five kilometers of the safe house, he says, they had to file a request form known as a 5-W, spelling out the who, what, when, where and why of the mission. Permission from headquarters took hours, and if shooting might be involved, it was often denied. To go beyond five kilometers required a CONOP (for "concept of operations") that was much more elaborate and required approval from two layers in the field, and finally the Joint Special Operations Task Force at Baghram air base near Kabul. To get into a fire fight, the permission of a three-star general was necessary. "That process could take days," Rice recalled to NEWSWEEK. He often typed forms while sitting on a 55-gallon drum his men had cut in half to make a toilet seat. "We'd be typing in 130-degree heat while we're crapping away with bacillary dysentery and sometimes the brass at Kandahar or Baghram would kick back and tell you the spelling was incorrect, that you weren't using the tab to delimit the form correctly."

But Rice made his request anyway. Days passed with no word. The window closed; the target-whether Mullah Omar or not-moved on. Rice blames risk aversion in career officers, whose promotions require spotless ("zero defect") records-no mistakes, no bad luck, no "flaps." The cautious mind-set changed for a time after 9/11, but quickly settled back in. High-tech communication serves to clog, rather than speed the process. With worldwide satellite communications,

high-level commanders back at the base or in Washington can second-guess even minor decisions.

In Pakistan, President Musharraf was wary of his American allies in the War on Terror. In 2002, he told a high-ranking British official: "My great concern is that one day the United States is going to desert me. They always desert their friends." According to this official, who declined to be identified sharing a confidence, Musharraf cited the U.S. pullouts from Vietnam in the 1970s, Lebanon in the 1980s and Somalia in the 1990s. Still, he quickly gave the Americans considerable leeway to operate inside Pakistan. He did not demand prior approval of Predator attacks, and he allowed "hot pursuit" for American forces five kilometers or more inside the border. (With a grim laugh, one U.S. officer interviewed by NEWSWEEK recalled watching on Predator video as insurgents fled across the border and stopped on what they thought was safe terrain-until a U.S. Special Ops helo reared up and blasted them.) Musharraf told the Americans he understood that they would do what they had to do to attack high-value targets, although he indicated the Pakistanis might have to issue pro forma denunciations. His one request, said a U.S. official who dealt directly with the Pakistani leader, was that bin Laden not be captured alive and be brought to trial in Pakistan.

The cooperation has resulted in some high-profile successes. Working with the Pakistani police, the CIA and FBI helped to capture "KSM"-Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, Al Qaeda's operations chief and mastermind of the 9/11 attacks-at a house in Quetta, a city near the Afghan border, on March 1, 2003. Mohammed Naeem Noor Khan, a Qaeda communications expert, was picked up in Karachi in 2004 (and released, to the immense frustration of American officials, last week by the Pakistan government without ever having been formally charged with a crime). KSM's successor as chief of operations, Abu Faraj al-Libbi, was seized in May 2005. Qaeda officials who came down out of the mountains to make contact with jihadists risked exposure, especially if they were at all careless about using cell phones that could be tracked.

But the mountains themselves have remained virtually impenetrable. After Al Qaeda twice tried to assassinate Musharraf in 2003, the Pakistani leader decided he had no choice but to go after the jihadists in their lair. Generals blustered about trapping bin Laden between a "hammer" (American forces operating out of Afghanistan) and an "anvil" (the Pakistani military). Pakistani tanks and helicopter gunships began to rumble and roar into the northwestern territories. But despite periodic claims of success, the fighting on the ground went badly. The Pakistani forces had been trained to fight on the plains of Punjab against the Indian Army. They were not well suited for guerrilla war and sustained heavy casualties. More broadly, questions remain about the loyalties of the Frontier Constabulary, the militia responsible for security in the tribal areas. A Western military officer with experience on both sides of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border says that FC troops often fail to warn U.S. units of militants crossing over into Afghanistan; in May

2006 one FC soldier even shot and killed an American officer in Pakistan. Musharraf can rightly claim to have purged the ISI of agents with lingering Taliban and Qaeda sympathies, but the Western officer claims that several of those former agents are now unofficially aiding their former charges.

The Iraq War, meanwhile, has proved to be a black hole for the Americans, devouring men and matériel and absorbing the attention of the brass in Washington. In 2005, the CIA gave President Bush a secret slide show on the hunt for bin Laden. The president was taken aback by the small number of CIA case officers posted to Afghanistan and Pakistan. "Is that all there are?" the president asked, according to a former intelligence official, who declined to be identified discussing White House meetings. The CIA had already embarked on a "surge" of sorts, and doubled the number of officers in the field. But many were inexperienced and raw recruits, and they produced little improvement in "actionable" intelligence.

CIA officials at Langley were anxiously watching their flank. At the Pentagon, Rumsfeld, vexed by the CIA's inability to provide actionable intel, had been pushing to get Special Forces into clandestine operations and gathering of human intelligence (HUMINT). Under an "execute order" approved by President Bush in July 2005, the Pentagon identified 350 Qaeda targets globally, including senior leaders, recruiters, financiers and couriers, according to a high-ranking Defense official who, like others quoted anonymously in this story, did not wish to be identified revealing such matters. The CIA naturally resisted this invasion of its turf. Congressmen and ambassadors grumbled that they were being kept in the dark about the military's black ops.

The Defense official claims that "the Horn of Africa has been a fruitful place" for missions. But when it came to going after the top Qaeda leadership along the Pakistan border, the military was still dogged by poor intelligence and risk aversion. These two chronic failings combined to undo what may have been America's best shot at killing or capturing some top Qaeda leaders since the escape at Tora Bora.

In late 2005, the CIA and the Pentagon's Joint Special Operations Command came up with intelligence that gave them "80 percent confidence" that either Zawahiri, bin Laden's longtime sidekick, or another of bin Laden's highest-ranking lieutenants would be attending a meeting in a small compound just inside Pakistan along its northern border with Afghanistan. "This was the best intelligence picture we had ever seen" about a so-called HVT, said a former intelligence official who was involved in the operation. The spooks and Special Operations Forces planned an airborne commando raid that could have been produced by Jerry Bruckheimer. Some 30 U.S. Navy SEALs were to be flown by C-130 transport planes, under cover of darkness, to a spot high above the Afghan side of the Pakistan border, about 30 to 40 miles away from the target. The SEALs would jump from the plane and use parasails-motorized hang gliders-

to fly through the night sky, across the mountains, to a secret staging point close to the compound. They would attack the target and capture Zawahiri or whatever other HVTs were on the premises, killing them only if necessary. The SEALs would then spirit their captives away to another staging point, where two CH-53 helicopters awaited to airlift them back to Afghanistan.

The plan was enthusiastically endorsed by the then CIA Director Porter Goss and JSOC Commander Stanley McChrystal, who was a major at the time. But when the Pentagon's civilian leadership, including Rumsfeld and his principal intelligence adviser, Under Secretary Steve Cambone, pored over the plan, they began raising questions. Was the intelligence good enough to justify the risk to U.S. troops and the possible blowback on Musharraf if the mission went bad? "Can't you get the confidence up to 100 percent?" Pentagon officials asked their CIA counterparts, eliciting frustrated eye-rolling in return, according to the former intelligence officer interviewed by NEWSWEEK. According to a former Defense official close to Rumsfeld, a familiar Pentagon planning maxim had already kicked in: the more uncertain the intelligence, the more precautions the military wants to take. The top brass was asking, were two helicopters really sufficient to extract the SEALs? What if one was shot down or had mechanical problems? Images of the failed 1980 Iranian hostage-rescue mission came to mind. Or Rangers fighting their way through Mogadishu to rescue trapped commandos in the 1993 fiasco known as Blackhawk Down. In order to bolster the rescue part of the plan, JSOC proposed sending in teams of Army Rangers to add security. As discussions continued, the size of the Ranger team grew to 150, about five times the size of the initial commando force.

To Rumsfeld, the operations began to seem more and more like an invasion of Pakistan. Musharraf would have to be consulted, or at least informed. But did that mean his unreliable intelligence service, the ISI, would leak the plan to Al Qaeda? The official close to Rumsfeld says that the SecDef became increasingly wary as he weighed potential risk against reward.

But time was of the essence. The C-130s were circling over the border, the SEALs were ready to jump, while Rumsfeld was still deliberating with the top brass. CIA Director Goss went to the Pentagon to implore him to go ahead. At the last minute Rumsfeld called off the raid. "Believe me, if this had been easy and there were certainty, we'd have done this," says the former Rumsfeld adviser. "There just wasn't certainty."

Certainty is painfully hard to achieve in this hunt, despite America's enormous technological edge. American spy satellites, designed for the cold war against the Soviets, don't have antennas sensitive enough to pick up cell-phone or handheld radio transmissions. So Special Ops teams-known as Task Force Orange-have slipped into the tribal areas to plant listening devices on various peaks. The listening posts have been useful, in several cases pinpointing the

locations of Qaeda operatives. But the jihadists have adapted, and use codes to disguise the kind of actionable information the hunters need.

The common saying among intelligence and Special Ops officers is that all the thugs have been killed by now-but the smart guys have survived, and become smarter. Predators have scored some hits, including killing Abu Hamza Rabia, another Qaeda operations chief (al-Libbi's successor), in 2005. (To cloak American involvement, the Pakistani government cooked up the story that Rabia had blown himself up experimenting with explosives.) But the jihadists have learned to avoid the drones: it's easier to hear a Predator, which sounds like a loud model airplane, in the Pakistani hill country than in an Iraqi city. And when the Americans shoot and miss, the consequences can be grave. In January 2006, a Predator fired a Hellfire missile at a house in Damadola, Pakistan, where Zawahiri was supposed to be meeting. Once again, the intel was unreliable: Zawahiri was not there, but more than a dozen civilians were killed, and the survivors were enraged.

By 2006, Musharraf was weary. American focus on Afghanistan was fading; the war in the territories was costly in terms of lives and public sentiment; the jihadists were starting to spill into the cities. The president of Pakistan decided to cut his losses, and in September 2006, his local governor signed a peace deal with tribal militants.

Al Qaeda did not hesitate to assert itself. Jihadists paraded brazenly in Waziristan, dragging "criminals" through the streets. American satellite photos soon showed single files of foreign jihadists, their feet sometimes wrapped in plastic bags against the snow, crossing the Pakistani border into Afghanistan. An Algerian man known as "the Bombmaker," a seasoned veteran of Iraq, set up shop to teach jihadists how to build IEDs. Local militants ruled through assassination and intimidation. The experienced Western military official interviewed by NEWSWEEK described how militants killed a petty merchant and his entire family simply for selling watermelons to the local constabulary. "Imagine what they'd do to the guy who sells out Osama," said the officer.

In late 2006 and early 2007, anxious top American policymakers, including Vice President Cheney and Defense Secretary Robert Gates, traveled to Pakistan to persuade Musharraf to renew his military operations along the frontier. "There is no question the peace agreement failed Pakistan and it failed us," said Townsend, the White House counterterrorism chief. The Pakistani president was in a difficult position, risking his unpopular and shaky regime if he cracked down on the jihadists and risking it if he didn't. Once more, Sisyphus began to roll the stone up the hill: Musharraf ordered 20,000 soldiers to march into the territories, to reinforce the 80,000 who were already there. But "I don't think the Pakistani military is going to move wholeheartedly against Al Qaeda," a knowledgeable Pakistani military source told NEWSWEEK. "I don't think their hearts are in it." The tough talk by American politicians calling for unilateral action

is not helping matters, says retired Pakistani Army Lt. Gen. Talat Masood, a well-regarded moderate. "It's very humiliating for civilians and the military alike," he says. (Mahmud Ali Durrani, Pakistan's ambassador to Washington, insisted that Pakistan is doing more than the United States to attack Al Qaeda. "The threat to us is far greater," he said.)

U.S. Special Operations Forces have had considerable practice by now chasing jihadists in Iraq and Afghanistan. The JSOC headquarters at Baghram is so full of high-tech listening and tracking equipment that it resembles "something out of 'Star Wars'," says a Pentagon official who has seen the place. In recent months, says John Arquilla, a Special Ops expert at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, Calif., the U.S. military has achieved a 100-to-1 kill ratio (100 dead guerrillas to every American). But by calling in airstrikes, the Americans also kill a lot of civilians, which breeds more jihadists. And according to Thomas Johnson, also at the Naval Postgraduate School, the military's continued fixation on body counts and kill ratios is irrelevant and even counterproductive. "When you kill a person it's a multiplication factor. It demands that all the male relatives join the fight."

The Americans will not find top Qaeda leaders unless they can win the trust of local tribesmen who may know their whereabouts. Johnson, an Afghan expert, spent last February at Forward Operating Base Salerno near the Pakistan border, briefing commanders on the tribal custom of Pashtunwali. He says only about 5 percent of American troops in Afghanistan ever leave their bases—a statistic, he believes, that explains better than any other why Americans are struggling in the battle for intelligence. He says most soldiers in Afghanistan don't know simple phrases like "stop," "go," or "put your hands up." Americans continually make cultural blunders, like using canine units to search people's homes (dogs are considered unclean in Muslim culture). Meanwhile the Taliban works at winning the trust and confidence of villagers—or intimidating them. "They go into villages and say, 'The Americans have the watches but we have the time. We might not come back in a week or a year, but you bet your britches we'll eventually come back'," says Johnson.

The American military, understandably, puts a high priority on "force protection," but as a practical matter that means staying behind armor and barricades. Rice, the A-Team sergeant stuck in his safe house near Kandahar, recalls that his team's frustration peaked when a memo came down from the brass at Baghram, ordering men not to initiate fire fights and even not to use words like "death" and "destruction" in their CONOPS. Among Rice's men, it became known as the "limp dick memo." (The Defense Department declined to comment specifically on Rice's memories.)

The American military is forever caught in a dilemma. During the early days of the cold war, the old boys who ran the CIA began to reason that when it came to fighting against an underhanded foe in a battle for global survival, the rules of fair

play they had learned as schoolboys no longer applied. If the communists fight dirty, we must, too, they rationalized-or freedom would perish. This ends-justifying-the-means rationale led to foolish and ultimately unsuccessful assassination plots and other dirty tricks that disgraced and demoralized the CIA when the agency's so-called Crown Jewels were revealed during Watergate. After 9/11, Bush administration officials, particularly Vice President Cheney, vowed to take the gloves off against Al Qaeda. But in the aftermath of allegations of torture in secret prisons, there has been a strong push back, particularly among administration lawyers disturbed by the abuse of constitutional rights. According to knowledgeable sources, Rumsfeld's deputy for intelligence, Steve Cambone, engaged in an angry debate with the Pentagon's top lawyer, William Haynes, over the activities of U.S. Special Forces-who in the minds of some government lawyers and lawmakers have been given too much, not too little, license to roam.

The frustrations at the top are understandable. There is a certain desperate quality to the hunt for bin Laden. Some experts think he's constantly on the move; others believe he must be holed up somewhere, never using electronics, impossible to detect. After the close call in 2004, says Omar Farooqi, "the Sheik" shrank his security staff and employed only faithful Arabs. A Western military official who has worked both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border told NEWSWEEK that bin Laden may have deployed small groups of bodyguards spread along the frontier with the same "signature": small security detail, secretive, saying little to local villagers, always moving on. That's a perfect disinformation campaign, says the official. The nearby locals start whispering that bin Laden must be nearby. "Word gets around that it must have been him," he says. "We react. It throws us off the trail and makes us waste assets following bad leads. And it's a cheap and easy way to do."

No wonder the intelligence community is reaching out to anyone who can glean even a hint of bin Laden's whereabouts. As early as November 2001, John Shroder, a geographer at the University of Nebraska, found himself addressing an audience of intelligence officials, analyzing the rock formations behind bin Laden in a video released that October. About all he could do was tell the spooks that bin Laden seemed to be in the western part of Afghanistan's Spin Ghar Mountains. "We were grasping at straws," says Michael Scheuer, who was special adviser to the head of the CIA's bin Laden unit at the time. "We called in geologists. We had the Germans bring in ornithologists because they thought they heard a bird chirping on a video and wanted to see if it was particular to certain regions of South Asia." The agency enlisted doctors to look for signs of kidney disease, which bin Laden was rumored to be suffering from at the time. A Dec. 27, 2001, video, nicknamed by analysts "the Gaunt Tape," shows a haggard-looking bin Laden, who seems to be unable to move his left arm. "But the doctors couldn't pinpoint any problems with his health," says Scheuer.

CIA analysts began calling bin Laden "Elvis" because he was here, there, but really nowhere. Some wonder if he's dead. He has not issued a video since the end of 2004, and he has not been heard on an audiotape for more than a year. It is possible he is incapacitated by disease—the rumors of kidney problems persist. There have been reports that bin Laden has sought medication to be used in the terminal stages of kidney disease. But "I don't have any reason to think he's dead," says Townsend, who sees all the intelligence coming to the office of the president. "It's inconceivable to me to think that he would expire and we wouldn't have some information, intelligence, that something had happened to him."

If he is alive, there is no doubt he means to kill as many Americans as possible. "The Sheik's desire is to strike another blow at the palaces of the West," says Sheik Said, the senior Egyptian Qaeda leader. In 2003, Scheuer points out, bin Laden even managed to gain religious sanction from a radical Saudi cleric to kill "no more than 10 million Americans" with a nuclear or biological weapon.

America remains his obsession. NEWSWEEK interviewed Nasser al Bahri, who served as bin Laden's personal bodyguard for six years. Now under very loose house arrest in Yemen, the former bodyguard still reveres "the Sheik." According to al Bahri, bin Laden used to amuse himself by chanting this bit of doggerel, part of a longer poem by a jihadist poet:

I am the enemy of America  
Till this life is over and doomsday comes.  
It's the root and trunk of destruction,  
It's the evil on the branches of trees.

"The only thing that seems to rile him up is mention of America," says al Bahri. "I think from the very beginning of his childhood he hated America. I don't know why. He won't even drink a Pepsi."

Bin Laden's No. 2, Zawahiri, is just as baleful toward the United States. According to various accounts, it was Zawahiri, a well-educated Egyptian doctor, who before 9/11 persuaded bin Laden to turn his terrorist ambitions from the "near enemy" (the corrupt regimes of Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt) to the "far enemy" (the United States). Zawahiri may represent more of a threat to the West than bin Laden. By taking himself off the grid, bin Laden may no longer be in operational control; capturing him might be more symbolic than significant. But meanwhile Zawahiri has become more visible. "In the past two years he has put out more than 30 messages," says Rita Katz, director and founder of the SITE Institute, which monitors jihadist Web sites. She notes that within hours of the storming of the Red Mosque by Pakistani forces, Zawahiri's response was uploaded on the Internet. "I believe he's in or near an urban area where he is able to get news and respond to issues quickly," says Katz. "In 2005, you'd still see videos with cheap fabric backdrops that rippled in the wind. Today, they

seem to be using better equipment, complete with artificial backgrounds added postproduction." "Al Qaeda may have seventh-century ideas, but they have 21st-century acumen for communications," says Georgetown University terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman. "Al Qaeda has become a world brand and their videos are the juice that fueled that recognition."

The overarching question is whether Al Qaeda has the ability to strike the United States with another "spectacular" along the lines of 9/11, or possibly something worse. When the Qaeda leadership was driven into the hills in 2001, and many of their top operators were killed or captured, the jihadist movement was sustained by local wannabes. They set off bombs and blew up subways and discos from Indonesia to Britain. But they were not very high-tech, and some were klutzes, like the two mokes who last June failed to set off a pair of car bombs in London and then tried, unsuccessfully, to become suicide bombers at the Glasgow airport. (One eventually did die of his burns, but no civilians were injured when their car caught fire but failed to explode.)

When the United States struck Afghanistan in 2001, "there were probably 3,000 core Al Qaeda operatives," says Arquilla of the Naval Postgraduate School. "We killed or captured about 1,000; about 1,000 more ended up in distant parts of the world. And about 1,000 ended up in Waziristan. But the great terror university in Afghanistan is gone; they've relied on the Web since. They haven't had the hands-on instruction and the bonding of the camps. That's resulted in low-skill levels. Their tradecraft is really much poorer."

The danger now, says Arquilla, is that the longer the Iraq War goes on, the more skilled the new generations of jihadists will become. "They're getting re-educated," he says. "The first generation of Al Qaeda came through the [Afghan] camps. The second generation are those who've logged on [to Islamist Web sites]. The next generation will be those who have come through the crucible of Iraq. Eventually, their level of skill is going to be greater than the skill of the original generation."

It is disturbing to recall that when U.S. forces overran Qaeda training grounds, they found scientific documents discussing nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. (Zawahiri is reported to have a particular interest in chem-bio.) A true weapon of mass destruction is very hard to come by, and it may be a while before the jihadists can make, steal or buy a nuclear weapon or a germ bomb capable of killing more than a few people. But dirty bombs are less difficult to craft from conventional explosives and radioactive material, the kind that can be found in the waste bins of hospitals. Crumpton recalls that Zawahiri canceled a planned attack to set off a cyanide bomb in the New York City subways in 2003. "We don't know why," says Crumpton, or what became of the team Al Qaeda recruited to stage the attack but apparently never dispatched to the United States. "You think: Why did he call it off? Where are they?"

Intelligence officials in Europe and America have spent a jittery summer seeing signs that Al Qaeda is gearing up to hit the West in some significant way. In his interview with NEWSWEEK, Admiral Redd of the National Counterterrorism Center was guarded about details. But it was clear from his comments that the terror watchers are seeing signs and hearing chatter that have put them on alert. For an attack on Europe? America? "They would like to come west, and they would like to come as far west as they can," is how Redd puts it. The intelligence community lacks specific information about the movements of terrorists, he said. "What we do have, though, is a couple of threads which indicate, you know, some very tactical stuff, and that's what-you know, that's what you're seeing bits and pieces of, and I really can't go much more into it."

Meanwhile, the hunt for bin Laden goes on. Recently, it has gone all the way back to the beginning-to the Tora Bora region. This summer, about 500 jihadists-Taliban and Al Qaeda, increasingly indistinguishable-infiltrated the area. After three American Special Forces soldiers were killed by a roadside bomb in early August, the Americans launched a sweep of bin Laden's old hideout, backed by aerial strikes. Last week a NEWSWEEK reporter, led by a guide, hiked up into the mountains to visit the battlefield.

On the way up, they passed small convoys of American Humvees and Afghan National Army Ford Ranger pickups. Along the trail, past a few dozen unmarked Arab graves from the 2001 bombing, they saw bits of shrapnel, corroded bullets and scraps of military detritus, some of it quite old. Leaflets blew around. They warned the locals that American troops would hunt down people who sheltered terrorists. On the leaflets were garish pictures of evil-looking masked men with glaring white eyes; one had the word OSAMA in a red circle with a diagonal slash through it.

The NEWSWEEK reporter and his guide walked past a series of burned-out Soviet tanks, scrawled with triumphalist Arab graffiti, leftovers from the struggle against the Russian occupation of Afghanistan. Eventually, they came to bin Laden's old cave complex, just above a gorge known as the Malawa Valley. On a wide ledge was Osama's old swimming pool, dry now, but with its still spectacular view. There had been rumors of sightings of the Sheik and his entourage. But they were just rumors.